The Changing Experiences of Bisexual Male Adolescents

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Drawing on in-depth interviews with fifteen openly bisexual male youth from sixth forms across the UK, this article documents positive experiences of bisexual male youth in school: participants had positive coming out experiences and did not encounter significant discrimination or harassment because of their sexual identity. Participants attribute this to the inclusive environments of their schools and local cultures. Examining the narratives of two participants who had negative experiences, this article also highlights continued issues for bisexual youth in schools. It thus advances our understanding of contemporary bisexual lives in educational institutions, and contributes to debates about whether sixth forms are more inclusive spaces than secondary schools for bisexuals.

Key words: biphobia; bisexuality, coming out, homophobia, inclusion, sixth form.

Introduction

Research on sexual minority youth has traditionally documented harrowing experiences of homophobia, harassment and discrimination (Rivers 2001). It has found young people growing up surrounded by homophobic language and attitudes, living within a social and legal system biased towards heterosexuals (Flowers and Buston, 2001). These narratives of oppression are shown to be particularly deleterious in educational settings, with homophobic bullying rife and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students maintaining elevated levels of absenteeism compared to their heterosexual peers (Ryan and Rivers 2003; Warwick, Aggleton and Douglas, 2001).

However, cultural understandings of sexuality are not static, and there has been a marked shift in attitudes toward sexual minorities in recent years (Anderson 2011; Ripley et al. 2011; Weeks 2007). In this improving social landscape, experiences of sexual minorities are influenced by a range of demographic variables including gender, with men and women's experiences varying significantly (McCormack and Anderson 2014; Russell and Seif, 2002). Yet while scholars have documented the positive influence of decreasing homophobia on both heterosexuals (Adams, 2011; Anderson, 2009; McCormack 2012a) and LGBT youth (Jones and Clarke, 2007; McCormack, 2012b; Savin-Williams, 2005), the effect it has on specific sexual identities remains unclear (Worthen, 2012). Given the unique discrimination faced by bisexuals (Burleson, 2005), often described as 'biphobia' (Eliason, 1997), it is necessary to examine the influence of decreasing homophobia on bisexual youth and whether decreasing homophobia influences biphobia in the broader culture[1] (Anderson and McCormack in press; Russell and Seif, 2002).

In this article, we draw on in-depth interviews with fifteen openly bisexual males aged 16-18 from sixth form colleges[2] across the United Kingdom. Adopting a critical interpretive approach grounded in social constructionist heuristic, we find that these participants'

experiences are significantly improved on those described in the academic literature, with the majority having positive coming out experiences. Furthermore, the dominant narrative is one of acceptance and inclusion, both among friends and within their local cultures. Despite this, some students continue to experience biphobic and heteronormative assumptions about their identities. Nonetheless, these instances are greatly decreased and the majority of participants reported positive experiences of being openly bisexual. We use the social constructionist, pro-feminist framework of inclusive masculinity theory (Anderson 2009) to explain these findings, and examine their implications for the sociology of education.

Growing up as a Sexual Minority in the United Kingdom

While adolescence is commonly held to be a period of storm and stress, research has documented that young people who maintain same-sex desires experience additional strain and tension from living within a heteronormative society (Meyer, 2003). Not only do lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) youth have to resolve their sexual desires with conflicting societal norms, they often suffer discrimination and harassment if they are open about their desires (Ryan and Rivers, 2003). Accordingly, many LGB youth remain closeted during their adolescence in order to avoid marginalisation and bullying from their peers (Harbeck, 1992; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010). Yet remaining closeted has psychological repercussions, as many LGB youth internalise the homophobia of the broader culture (Flowers and Buston, 2001). Perhaps unsurprisingly, a consistent finding in the academic literature until recently (Mustanski, Garofalo and Emerson, 2010) has been that LGB youth have higher rates of suicide than their heterosexual peers (D'Augelli, Hershberger and Pilkington, 2001; Ungvarski and Grossman, 1999).

The role of schools in the harassment and marginalization suffered by sexual minority youth is a particular concern. One consistent finding is that schools have failed to provide an

environment for LGB students that is free from bullying and harassment (Epstein, O'Flynn and Telford, 2003). Indeed, the bullying of LGB students has been shown to be rife, with homophobic language widespread and unchallenged by members of staff (Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Rivers, 2001). Retrospective studies of LGB students found that the worst forms of harassment included extreme acts of physical violence, but also highlighted that there existed less visible, but still-damaging, social effects (Warwick, Aggleton and Douglas, 2001). Flowers and Buston (2001) reported that the gay youth in their study felt 'defined by difference' (p. 54) and that most participants had a fear, if not dread, of schooling.

In addition to failing to protect LGB youth from harassment and marginalisation, heteronormativity is inscribed in schools through school curricula, official policies and institutional norms (Allen, 2007; Jones and Hillier, 2014). As Ferfolja (2007) writes, 'schools…reinforce and perpetuate silences and invisibility in relation to non-heterosexual issues and subjectivities' (p. 160). Pallotta-Chiarolli (2010) demonstrates how parents who fall outside heteronormative understandings of the family are excluded by school discourses. Indeed, whether this is as a result of the inadequacy of sexuality education (Alldred and David, 2007) or the absence of openly LGB role models (McCormack, 2012a); the after-effects of Section 28 (Nixon and Givens, 2008) or the absence of substantial discussion of sexuality in school curricula (Bruess and Greenberg, 2008; Epstein, 2014), the presence of heteronormativity in school settings is a structural and overarching feature of school culture that has had a detrimental impact on the school experiences and psychological development of LGB youth (Jones and Clarke, 2007).

However, there has been a lessening of conservative morality pertaining to sexual minorities over the past thirty years (Loftus, 2001; McCormack and Anderson, 2014; Weeks 2007) which has resulted in increased numbers of LGB youth coming out during secondary education (Grov *et al.*, 2006; Riley, 2010). And despite a trend of adolescents eschewing

traditional sexual identity labels (Kuper, Nussbaum and Mustanski, 2012; Savin-Williams, 2005), many youth are continuing to identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual. For these young people, coming out continues to be a significant event in their adolescence (Anderson, McCormack and Ripley, 2014; McCormack, Anderson and Adams, 2014; Riley, 2012).

It is evident that bisexual youth are aware of the social implications of coming out, and they are often strategic in determining who to come out to and in what context (Gorman-Murray, 2008). They most frequently opt to tell their friends about their same-sex desires before their parents, and tend to tell their mothers before their fathers (Savin-Williams and Ream, 2003). Furthermore, bisexual youth examine how other sexual minorities are treated, and consider the prevalence of homophobic language when determining whether to come out (Anderson, 2011;Burleson, 2005). Even so, there is limited research on the experiences of bisexual youth specifically—despite bisexuals facing unique forms of discrimination (Klein, 1993).

The Specificity of Bisexuality

While research has documented significant issues that affect LGB youth, it is also important to recognise that sexual minorities are not an homogenous group (Russell and Seif, 2002). Indeed, a critique of the literature on the experiences of LGB youth has been that it has not differentiated the factors that affect each sexual identity (Worthen, 2012). As a result, a body of research has highlighted the complexity and uniqueness of bisexuals' lived experience (see Barker and Langdridge, 2008; Burleson, 2005)—a necessary development given that it is estimated that 1.8% of people identify as bisexual (Gates, 2011).

One of the central reasons for the specificity of bisexuals' experiences is that they suffer what Ochs (1996) calls 'double discrimination'—not just from heterosexuals, but also from lesbian and gay people as well. One explanation for this is that it was once erroneously

believed that bisexual men were responsible for the spread of HIV to heterosexuals (Stokes, Taywaditep, Vanable and McKirnan, 1996), which resulted in stigma from heterosexual communities and is one reason why gay men feared further stigma from associating with bisexuals (Weiss, 2004).

Bisexuals have also been stigmatised as being neurotic, unable to love and solely concerned with sex (Klein, 1993). Perhaps one of the most pernicious stereotypes for bisexual youth is the view that bisexuality is a transitional phase between identifying as heterosexual and coming out as 'fully' gay (Burleson, 2005; Diamond, 2008). Consequently, bisexuals are accused of being cowardly (Eliason, 1997). Thus, the overwhelming social attitude toward bisexuality has been one of denial and erasure, from both heterosexual and gay communities. In their study of female bisexual sixth form students in the United Kingdom, Anderson, McCormack and Ripley (2014) conceptualised these prejudices and forms of discrimination collectively as 'bisexual burden'.

The prejudice and discrimination characterised by the umbrella term, bisexual burden, has also been referred to as biphobia, binegativity and other similar terms. The differences between these terms are complex and subtle, and there is an ongoing debate within the literature the efficacy of them. While recognising the value of the term biphobia to highlight the specificity of prejudice against bisexuals, there is significant overlap between biphobia and homophobia, as well as sexual prejudice more broadly (see also Herek 2004; McCormack and Anderson, 2014). Thus, we use bisexual burden as an overarching term that recognises the complexity of the debates around labelling while maintaining an understanding of the unique nature of bisexual stigma.

Although recent research has highlighted a more varied experience for bisexuals that includes positive experiences (Klesse, 2005; McCormack, Anderson and Adams, 2014; Stotzer, 2009), the negative effects of bisexual burden are still evident for many bisexual

youth (Espelage, Aragon, Birkett and Koenig, 2008). This is most notable among bisexual youth in schools, who have worse experiences than their gay and lesbian peers (Robinson and Espelage, 2011). Significantly, Robinson and Espelage highlight that the majority of bisexual youth are not at risk, yet they stress that bisexuals are more likely to be the victims of cyber-bullying and social harassment. However, given the changing attitudes toward homosexuality in the United Kingdom (Anderson, 2014; McCormack, 2012), it is necessary to examine whether these findings are of relevance to bisexual youth today.

The Intersection of Bisexuality and Masculinity

In order to understand the experiences of bisexual male youth, it is also necessary to examine the intersection of gender and sexual identities (Schwartz and Rutter, 1998). Homophobia has traditionally served to stratify men and their masculinities (Floyd, 2000), which has resulted in the policing of men's actions when they do not conform to a narrow set of acceptable gendered behaviours (Mac an Ghaill, 1994). This regulatory power of homophobia has been explained by the concept *homohysteria*, defined as the fear of being socially perceived as gay (Anderson, 2009).

In homohysteric cultures, men go to great lengths to avoid behaviours socially coded as feminine or gay (Epstein, 1997). Thus, in the 1980s and early 1990s, researchers found that how men could dress and who they could socialise with was severely restricted (Plummer, 1999). Given the difficultly of proving one's heterosexuality in a homophobic culture (Anderson, 2008), boys and men exhibited homophobic, misogynistic and hypermasculine behaviours in an effort to prove their heterosexuality and raise their masculine capital (Floyd, 2000; Mac an Ghaill, 1994). Here, bisexuality was erased and conflated with homosexuality, and homosexuality was stigmatised in school settings (Epstein, 1997).

However, a growing body of research on masculinities in education documents that heterosexual male youth now espouse pro-gay attitudes and adopt an expanded set of esteemed gendered behaviours (Anderson, 2014; McCormack, 2014a; Roberts, 2013). In contrast to previous scholarship on masculinities, these young men embody a softer, more inclusive form of masculinity (McCormack, 2012a; Roberts, 2013). This social trend is explained by Anderson's (2009) *inclusive masculinity theory*, a grounded, social constructionist theory that applies sociological research and feminist perspectives to understand the social dynamics and stratifications of men's gendered relations. Inclusive masculinity theory contends that the expansion of gendered behaviours available to heterosexual male youth is the result of declining homohysteria (see McCormack and Anderson, 2014). As boys no longer fear being socially perceived as gay, homophobia becomes less effective in regulating their gendered behaviours. Anderson (2009) argues that these changes are the result of a broader social trend of improving attitudes toward homosexuality.

Changing Attitudes to Sexuality in the United Kingdom

In the United Kingdom, attitudes toward same-sex sex are changing at a rapid rate. This is best evidenced by *British Social Attitudes* (BSA) survey data which has asked whether homosexuality is 'always wrong', 'sometimes wrong', 'occasionally wrong' or 'never wrong' at various points over the past 30 years. In 1983, the first year the question was asked, 49.5 per cent of respondents said that it was 'always wrong', a figure that rose to a peak of 63.6 per cent in 1987. Since then, a significant shift in attitudes has occurred with only 23.7 per cent answering the same way in 2006 (Anderson, 2009).

While it is possible that attitudes toward homosexuality are more positive than toward bisexuality, there have been similar results examining same-sex relationships more generally.

For example, BSA survey data also shows that, when asked about the morality of same-sex relationships, 46% of the population thought they were 'always wrong' in 2000, but this dropped to just 23% in 2012 (Curtice and Ormston, 2012). Recent research has also demonstrated that these quantitative findings are replicated among groups with traditionally high levels of homophobia—heterosexual young men and sport fans (Adams, 2011; Anderson, 2011; Cashmore and Cleland, 2012).

This liberalisation of attitudes has occurred alongside a significantly expanded social and political landscape for sexual minorities (Weeks, 2007). Here, the legal privileging of heterosexuality has been eroded in the great majority of areas. Most recently, this introduction of same-sex marriages in England and Wales, with similar legislation set to pass in Scotland, means that same-sex attracted people now have full legal equality. The inclusion of both sexual orientation and gender reassignment as protected characteristics under anti-discrimination law are also evidence of this positive trend (McCormack, 2012a).

There have also been significant improvements in the recruitment and representation of LGB people into many professions, and much greater LGB visibility in the media (Netzley, 2010). While gay men have perhaps gained most from these advances, there has also been a similar, if less pronounced, rise in bisexual visibility and representation (Ripley et. al. 2011). Anderson and Adams (2011) demonstrate how this has had a positive influence on heterosexual men's attitudes. In a study of 60 heterosexual male undergraduate athletes in America, they found that almost all of them accepted bisexuality as a legitimate sexual identity without stigma. Indeed, the men maintained complex understandings of bisexuality, and many recognised aspects of bisexuality in their own identities.

While it is necessary to recognise that these positive trends are influenced by a number of demographic variables—and research has explored how decreasing homophobia intersects with class and masculinities (McCormack, 2014a)—it is evident that there has been

a significant shift in attitudes toward sexual minorities in the UK, and a concurrent shift in heterosexual men's gendered behaviours (Anderson, 2009; McCormack, 2014a). In this research, we explore how these social changes have impacted on the lives of bisexual male adolescents in the UK.

Methods

This qualitative study was designed to recruit a broad range of bisexual youth in order to understand the influence of declining homophobia on their lived experiences. Recognising the importance of the critique that research on sexual minorities too frequently recruits participants who are institutionalised into LGBT organisations (McCormack, 2014b; Savin-Williams, 2001), we used social networking websites and smartphone applications to recruit fifteen bisexual males, aged 16-18, from fifteen different sixth forms across the UK. Given the aforementioned gender differences in the experiences of bisexual youth (Russell and Seif, 2002) and the significance of the influence of masculinity on adolescent sexualities (Anderson, 2014), we focus on male adolescents in this article and examine the experiences of bisexual girls elsewhere (Anderson, McCormack and Ripley, 2014).

We used the Internet to locate participants as the majority of sexual minority youth have an Internet presence in order to develop social networks (Harper *et al.*, 2009). To recruit participants we advertised on websites, including those tailored for gay and bisexual youth, focusing on social networking sites such as GYC.com (Gay Youth Corner), LadsLads.com and Facebook.com, along with smartphone applications such as Grindr and Jack'd. While some of these sites and apps are often used to organise sexual encounters, they are also all used by young people as a form of social networking.

In order to recruit participants from these sites, we posted on message boards where possible, and also sent messages directly to potential participants—those aged 16-18 who

identified as bisexual on their profile. In these messages, we explained the research, what participation would involve, and offered them the opportunity to take part. The advantage of using such sites is that we could search directly for boys who openly identified as bisexual within the appropriate age-range.

We recruited fifteen participants from across the UK: 13 bisexual boys from England, 1 from Wales, and 1 from Scotland. Fourteen of the participants identified as white, with one identifying as mixed race. The participants came from a mix of middle and working class backgrounds. All participants were open about their bisexuality to at least some of their peers, and we excluded potential participants who did not fit this criterion. While the sample is limited in size, interviewing participants from separate institutions enables us to examine the experiences of bisexual boys from a larger geographical and institutional range than interviewing a larger number of participants from a smaller number of schools.

However, it is possible that these recruitment techniques are biased toward people with a level of cultural and sexual capital, who are more able to navigate these virtual spaces. Given that we would only reach people who have access to the internet and (for Grindr and Jack'd) a smartphone, there may also be issues of ethnicity, region and social class with our sample. While this restricts claims of generalizability, this approach is in line with McCormack's (2014b) call for a greater diversity of recruitment strategies for research with LGBT people.

Interviews were held in person for participants within one hour of the interviewer, while other interviews took place over the phone. Interviews occurred between January and July 2012, and lasted one hour on average. They were transcribed and coded for themes relating to the boys' coming out experiences, their identity as bisexual, their friendships and family relationships, bullying, and their school cultures. The coding was initially undertaken by the first author and cross-checked by the other authors, with each author reading the

transcripts in full (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984). We adopted a critical, interpretive approach to data analysis, recognising that participant narratives are not objective facts but ways by which they mediate the social world (Plummer, 1995). Thus, our findings do not speak to an objective reality but rather how our participants understand and make sense of their life experiences.

All ethical procedures recommended by the British Educational Research Association have been followed. This includes the right for participants to view transcripts, the right to withdraw from the research process, and guaranteeing the anonymity of the participants and their schools and colleges. These procedures were approved by Institutional Review Boards of the universities at which the researchers were employed. Given that online recruitment methods to interview 16 and 17-year-olds about issues related to sexuality may be deemed a sensitive area, we provided evidence to participants of the academic credentials of the project (Liamputtong, 2007): participants were sent links to the university staff profiles of the authors, and were also told they could contact these people in advance of the interview. All in-person interviews occurred in a public place (such as a café) and the academic nature of the interviews was also stressed.

Coming Out

Research has documented that coming out as a sexual minority can be a difficult and stressful process (Flowers and Buston, 2001; Hillier and Harrison, 2004); one that occurs over an extended period of time and, as Evans and Broido (1999: 663) comment, is not an ‘either/or’ concept.It also describes how these issues are exacerbated for bisexuals, who face discrimination from both heterosexuals and other sexual minorities (Ochs, 1996). However, the narratives of our participants contrasted with these findings, with only two boys having difficult coming out experiences. Indeed, thirteen of the fifteen participants were accepted by

their friends, with the majority commenting that the process had improved their relationships with peers and even increased their popularity at school.

Eleven of the bisexual boys interviewed first came out to friends or family while in secondary school, with four waiting until sixth form. Significantly, a high proportion of the participants came out at a young age. The youngest coming out age was 12, with another boy coming out aged 14, four boys coming out aged 15, and six boys coming out aged 16 (five of whom came out at secondary school). The remaining participants came out at sixth form, one aged 17 and two aged 18. Just three participants opted to tell their parents before anyone else, with the majority coming out to their friends first. While coming out was usually done in a school or sixth form setting, Rory said that the first people he told were friends from outside of school. The only other exception was Grant, who said, 'I told my best friend during a silly telling secrets game, when we were on a school trip together'. There was no correlation between age of coming out and the quality of the coming out experience.

Rather than damaging friendships (Poteat, Espelage and Koenig, 2009), several participants spoke about how coming out had strengthened their existing relationships. For example, James said, 'me and my friends have got closer because of it, and I found out another friend is bi'. Talking about how his bisexuality has influenced his reputation at school, Edward said, 'I suppose it gives me an edge. Like, you know how people are all indie and hipster and stuff? Being bisexual sort of boosted me up the ranks in their eyes'. Rather than being stigmatised, for these boys, bisexuality is positioned as a legitimate identity.

While some participants spoke of their friendships being enhanced, more argued that coming out had little impact on their friends' perceptions of them. Chris said, 'They were okay with it. It didn't matter to them', and Alex said, 'Well, they were totally fine with it'. Similarly, Tom said, 'It wasn't a big deal, and they said to me "yeah, that's alright mate"'. Asked if people treated him any differently after coming out, Grant said, 'No, they just act

the same way they've always done. The only difference really is the odd light-hearted joke between us'.

Several participants expressed surprise that their friends had been so accepting, not expecting this to be the case. For example, discussing his friends' reactions Rory said, 'They were fine with it. I think I've been really lucky that no one has ever had a problem with it'. More participants, though, had an explanation for the positive reactions, including that friends may have already guessed they were bisexual. Aaron said, 'my friends didn't react when I told them because two of them said they already knew'. Similarly, Myles commented, 'They weren't proud of me or anything. I just think they were glad I had finally admitted it'. These participants found the indifference of their friends a positive feature as they interpreted it as demonstrating inclusiveness and an acceptance of bisexuality.

Another interesting feature of these narratives is that the notion of coming out being a process that is repeated multiple times was less evident (cf. Riley, 2010). This is because the friends they initially disclosed the information to would often tell others for them. For example, Josh said, 'I came out to a few close friends, and then I sort of let people find out. I said to them "if it comes up in conversation it doesn't matter"'. Similarly, Owen said, 'my group of friends includes one of the biggest gossips ever, so she sort of came out for me, which is what I wanted'.

As noted above, three participants decided to come out to their parents first. In total, thirteen were out to both their friends and parents. Although parents' reactions were sometimes less positive than friends' reactions, most participants indicated that they had been fully supportive. For example, Grant felt very comfortable coming out to his parents, saying, 'They were very accepting, they literally just accepted it on the spot like my friends did… They've always said to me and my brothers that there is nothing wrong with being gay or bisexual'. Also identifying his parents' accepting attitudes, Josh said, 'They know I'm bi,

and they're totally fine with it. But it's not like dinner time conversation. It's almost like it's just normal to them'.

Explaining the Positive Reactions

As documented above, the majority of participants had very positive experiences of coming out as bisexual. While this corresponds with research that has found an increasingly inclusive culture for LGB youth (McCormack, 2012b; Savin-Williams, 2005), participants also highlighted the strategies they employed in planning their coming out. Nine of the bisexual boys interviewed decided to tell their 'best' or 'closest' friends first. Aaron said he came out to his closest friends because 'I knew they would truly accept me'. Expressing his view that younger people are more accepting of bisexuality, Edward said, 'I figured my friends would be cooler about it. It's a generational thing'.

The main reason identified by participants for their positive coming out experiences was the inclusive nature of the schools and sixth forms they attended (McCormack, 2012a). Highlighting this, as well as the changes in dominant forms of masculinities in such settings (c.f. Mac an Ghaill, 1994), Rory said, 'I go to an all-boys school, and I'm perfectly comfortable there. I never really felt out of place being bisexual'. Some attributed this inclusivity to the diversity of their schools. Talking about his secondary school, Myles said, 'You would have a lot of different social groups: the chavs ate on one side of the school, the emo and scene kids were down the back streets smoking. There was a very wide variety of social life'. Corresponding with masculinities research showing it is important for young heterosexual men to maintain friendships across social groupings (McCormack, 2011), Myles said that none of these groups had an issue with his bisexuality. He attributed this to the fact that there were no real cliques, adding, 'I just knew different people from every one… It was all the same because I had friends from every group'.

The inclusive school settings described by most participants corresponds with another factor that likely made coming out a more positive experience: the presence of other sexual minority youth (cf. Epstein, O'Flynn and Telford, 2003). Highlighting the importance of knowing other lesbian, gay and bisexual students, Tom said,

> I suppose there are experiences, or situations that we've been in where we can compare. We can say "Oh, how did you react in that situation? How did you respond to that person?" It was more like a humorous exchange of stories, than anything else.

James also said he had some LGB friends when he came out, and made more after. Reflecting on the positive impact his coming out had for his peers, he said, 'Some of my other friends were questioning, like, seeing if they wanted to come out of the closet or not. That came up quite a lot, either in school or after school. So obviously I knew what to say'.

Significantly, several participants who reported positive experiences were also the first to come out in their year. For example, Alex said,

> What was quite nice is that after I came out at sixth form a lot of people saw the reception I got, saw that it wasn't a problem, and therefore approached me and said "Alex, I think I might be gay or bisexual." And I spoke with them and they've come out… They saw that it wasn't a problem for me. Nobody cared.

Similarly, Edward said, 'Some guys actually came out after me – they were like "if Edward can, so can I"'. Also expressing how other sexual minority students benefitted from his positive coming out experience, Josh said, 'people who thought there were going to be problems realised when I came out that there weren't, and it helped them to come out… I think people expect there to be lots of problems, but there aren't anymore'. Expanding on why he thought other bisexual students might have feared coming out, he added, 'you hear these stories about people who get bullied so much they commit suicide, and stuff like that. But it wasn't anything like that'. This supports the notion that masculinities have become

more inclusive of sexual diversity in recent years (Anderson, 2009), as these inclusive attitudes were prevalent among heterosexual male peers.

Participants highlighted that another factor in their decision to come out was their local culture, which they also identified as being highly inclusive. For example, Chris, who lives in a large city in the West Midlands, attributed his positive experiences to attitudes in his local area:

> In my city, teenagers feel very comfortable and there isn't a lot of stigma. I suppose you will get a percentage who don't have a happy existence, but I've always found people to accept teenagers being gay or bisexual quite freely and quite openly.

Similarly identifying an inclusive broader culture, Alex, who lives in a large city in the South West of England, said, 'Obviously we don't face a lot of prejudice here anymore'.

We found that the bisexual participants living in a city were more likely to experience their secondary schools as inclusive places. Indeed, participants who found their local areas to be less accepting tended to hail from more rural areas. For example, Owen decided not to come out at his secondary school because 'the school I was at is in a rural town, so it wasn't so open-minded and liberal about that sort of thing'. Asked if he is out to his friends now, he added, 'Yeah, all my friends have taken it quite well. I would say they hold more ignorant than biphobic views. So it's just about educating people, rather than accusing or getting frustrated at them'. Similarly, Paul expressed frustration at living in a remote area. Asked if he has any bisexual friends, he said, 'I don't even know a single other bisexual that's in South Wales!' Here, the geography of many parts of South Wales underlines the potential split between urban and rural areas in terms of their inclusivity (see Swank, Fahs and Frost, 2013).

Inclusive School and Sixth Form Settings

Research has traditionally demonstrated that sexual minority youth experienced schools as hostile environments (Warwick, Aggleton and Douglas, 2001), and that this was the result of a particularly homophobic and violent form of masculinity (Mac an Ghaill, 1994). This study supports more recent research (McCormack, Anderson and Adams, 2011) that finds bisexual boys could be open about their sexuality in educational settings than found in the 1980s and 1990s. Some participants mentioned that the presence of Gay-Straight Alliances or anti-bullying campaigns made their sixth forms more welcoming environments (cf. Kennedy & Fisher, 2010). For example, asked if he saw other gay and bisexual students face problems at his sixth form, Josh said, 'Not in the school itself, as we had quite a tough stance on bullying and that sort of thing'. Speaking about the positive impact his sixth form's Gay-Straight Alliance had on visibility of sexual minority students, Will said, 'There are a lot more people, who you can see out in the open. So even though you're still in the minority, people don't care as much'.

In addition to this, many participants stated that teachers dealt with their sexuality in encouraging ways. For example, Aaron said of his sixth form, 'My teachers all know, but they don't bring it up very often. Every now and then we have mentoring sessions and they might ask how my boyfriend is. Stuff like that'. His one concern was that his head teacher, while caring, sometimes positioned bisexuality within a victimhood framework:

> She was trying to be helpful, giving me advice on safe sex, drugs, and all that patronising stuff. But I didn't like it much, because she seemed to be expecting me to be doing drugs, she expected me to be sleeping with lots of people without taking precautions.

While not all participants came out to their teachers, those that did so reported a positive reception. For example, Daniel said, 'Tutors support you if you have any problems you need

to talk about… They don't see any problem with it at all'. Similarly, talking about his secondary school teachers, Niall said, 'They were totally fine with it straight away'. Reflecting the positive view of both secondary school and sixth form teachers among participants, Edward said, 'They were actually way more friendly. If anything they treated me better after I came out'.

Negative Experiences

While the majority of bisexual boys reported entirely positive coming out experiences, there were some negative narratives as well. Two participants faced bullying similar to that experienced by openly gay and bisexual students in the 1980s and 1990s (Rivers, 2001). For example, Daniel spoke of the negative treatment he received from other students while at secondary school: 'It was absolutely horrible. I had bullies take the piss out of me, call me loads of names like "fag" and "queer." I got beaten up, and I lost most of my friends'. He went on to describe the physical violence and verbal harassment directed at him, adding, 'They punched me in my stomach and privates, kicked me, and pushed me over lots of times into the dirt. They used to say that I was a piece of dirt, so I deserved to be on the floor'. Daniel further reported that when he came out, a few of his friends stopped speaking to him. He commented, 'They didn't want to know me anymore. They thought I was like some sort of freak'.

When interviewed, Daniel no longer attended the same school, having moved to a different sixth form college. Asked if he still faces problems, he replied, 'Not anymore. Since I've been at college people accept me for who I am and support me. It's much better now'. He added, 'People accept me. Treat me as a normal person and not as some sideshow freak. They support me'. When asked why he thinks things have improved, he said, 'The fact that

everyone on your course chose to be there, so you can focus easier. Tutors support you if you have any problems you need to talk about, and people are generally more mature'.

The other participant who experienced significant discrimination because of his sexuality was Will, who attended a private religious secondary school. Like Daniel, he also experienced verbal and physical abuse for being openly bisexual. Talking about the physical violence, he said, 'I was pushed over a wall, punched in the head repeatedly, and someone threw me into a tree'. Will also reported homophobic slurs directed at him, and reported other significant incidents of homophobia: 'one person graffitied my whole desk so there was "gay" written everywhere. I came in the next day and all my books, all my notes, had "gay" written across them'. Asked what he thought the bullies' motivation was, Will said, 'Being different. Because I've always been over-caring of people'. Will also has dyspraxia, and suggested that some of the bullying might be attributable to his physical and behavioural differences—with the male youth who bullied him conforming to a more orthodox form of masculinity (Epstein, 1997). Will later added,

> I think the bullying, for them, was about seeing whether they could get me to snap. And I think that's what it became about. When they got thinking about me being bisexual, I think that suddenly started adding fuel to the fire.

Like Daniel, things improved for Will after he left his small secondary school for a larger sixth form college. When asked if there were differences in how he is treated now, he said, 'Yes, people are a lot more open. They don't care. It's more like "well, you are what you are, so what?"'

Although Will and Daniel were the only participants to encounter severe harassment, Grant said that 'rumours were going around that I was gay or transsexual' for several weeks before he came out. He added, 'It was only a joke, but it still put me off wanting to tell

anyone about me being bisexual for a while'. Significantly, when Grant did come out, he experienced less harassment and was fully accepted by his peers.

The remaining twelve participants reported extremely positive coming out stories, with no incidents of social discrimination or marginalisation. However, some reported encountering certain stereotypes about being bisexual (see Anderson, McCormack and Ripley, 2014). For example, four participants were told by others that they were 'confused' about their sexuality, or that they were 'just going through a phase'. Alex said, 'a lot of people thought it was just a phase at first, and that after a while I would choose whether I was gay or straight'. When asked if he ever hears such comments, Paul said, 'One person did say that. He doesn't see me as bisexual, he just sees me as gay and doesn't understand how it's possible to be interested in both genders'.

However, encountering these stereotypes did not appear to have a significant impact on these bisexual youth. As in Anderson, McCormack and Ripley's (2014) study on bisexual girls, participants attributed these misconceptions to ignorance and found that the people making the comments tended to be open to changing their minds. For example, Rory said,

> Some people think it's fake or false, because you're not entirely comfortable about being gay in the first place. I've had a few remarks like that, but my group of friends are not the type of people to think like that. Usually it would have been said as a joke, as opposed to being meant seriously. It happened occasionally, but they don't say it any more.

Similarly, when Josh first came out to his friends, one said, 'Oh, I'm sure you'll make up your mind at some point'. He added that, 'a few weeks later, when I told him I was definitely bisexual, that person was totally fine with it'. While elements of bisexual burden are present in several of the participants' narratives, the effect this has on them is significantly reduced when compared to older research (Burleson, 2005).

Discussion

This article examined the experiences of fifteen bisexual male adolescents attending sixth form colleges across the UK. Contrasting with what the literature has traditionally found (Ryan and Rivers, 2003; Jones and Clarke, 2007), the majority of participants in this study had positive experiences of being openly bisexual—describing an enriching coming out process, accepting friends, and inclusive school and sixth form cultures. Just two participants reported encountering sustained harassment, and while their experiences were harmful and emotionally distressing, both reported that the problems ceased once they left secondary school. While three participants experienced stereotyping because of their bisexuality, experiences of victimisation and marginalisation are mostly absent from the narratives of these bisexual boys.

Although six participants encountered elements of bisexual burden, they found that these assumptions disappeared rapidly after coming out. Additionally, many aspects of bisexual burden (for example the belief that bisexuals are greedy, neurotic, or unable to love) were not reported by any participants. In particular, the notion of double discrimination from both heterosexual and other sexual minority students (Ochs, 1996) was not observed. Rather, participants spoke of the affection and support they received from their lesbian and gay peers, within the broader inclusive environments of their schools. Even so, the negative experiences of some participants demonstrate the continued necessity of educational initiatives that promote equality of sexuality and combat homophobia (author citation; Ferfolja, 2007).

These findings are best explained by inclusive masculinity theory (Anderson, 2009). This theory predicts that as homohysteria declines, the set of acceptable gendered behaviours for heterosexual male youth expands and boys' masculinities are no longer structured by aggression or homophobia. Furthermore, Anderson and Adams (2011) found that in the absence of homohysteria, heterosexual men maintained sophisticated understandings of

bisexuality. It is therefore unsurprising that the experiences of bisexual male youth have improved, not just because of a liberalisation of attitudes toward sexuality, but also as a result of changes in the stratification of masculinities. This research adds to the growing body of literature on inclusive masculinity theory by extending the theory to a new demographic, and exploring the intersection of masculinity and bisexuality in the lived experiences of these bisexual male youth.

Given the argument in the sociology of education that schools are institutions that reproduce gender inequalities and esteem particular forms of damaging masculinity (Mac an Ghaill, 1994), this research demonstrates that it is important to explore the organisational context in which positive changes are documented. Debate exists about whether sixth forms are more inclusive of sexual minorities than secondary schools, and our data with participants from 15 separate sixth form colleges contributes to this discussion. Some findings would appear to support the contention that sixth forms are more inclusive spaces. For example, Daniel and Will found that their harassment ended when they moved to sixth form. Similarly, the Gay-Straight Alliances that participants spoke of positively only existed in sixth forms.

Despite this, the majority of participants came out at secondary school and reported positive experiences. Thus, it is necessary to examine why negative experiences occurred for some at secondary school. The negative experiences of two participants in this study seem to support Thompson *et al.*'s (2013) study which attributed motivations for gender and sexuality harassment to young people's appearance and interests ahead of their sexual orientation. This research would also suggest that while secondary schools can be hostile environments for sexual minority students, at least some school cultures are mirroring the broader trend of decreasing homophobia (Anderson, 2009; McCormack, 2012a; Weeks, 2007).

These findings support the contention that there has been a marked improvement in attitudes toward sexual minorities in the UK over recent years (Jones and Clarke, 2007;

McCormack, 2012b; Weeks, 2007). Importantly, this study highlights that the liberalisation of attitudes towards sexual morality does not only improve the situation for gays and lesbians, but also has a positive effect on bisexuals. That these bisexual boys encountered far fewer examples of discrimination and prejudice that once beset bisexuals (see Klein, 1993; Ochs, 1996) suggests that attitudes about bisexuality have shifted among their peers and in their local cultures. However, declining homophobia is an uneven process, potentially complicated by demographic factors such as geography, class, gender, race and religion (see McCormack, 2014a; Taylor, 2012); particularly so in a global context, where homophobia appears to be increasing in some countries. These factors could help to explain the range of coming out experiences of our participants.

Due to the size of the sample, it is not possible to generalise these results to the broader population of bisexual youth. Indeed, it is possible that the process by which we recruited participants privileged people from particular backgrounds, and that relying on websites and smartphone applications has a negative impact on recruiting participants from rural areas and those in severe socio-economic deprivation. However, the rigour and significance of our findings is improved by two key factors. First, recruiting participants from the Internet ameliorated the issues that stem from drawing participants from institutionalised groups for sexual minorities (McCormack, Adams and Anderson, 2013; Savin-Williams, 2001). Second, unlike studies that recruit from just one or two locations or institutions, participants hailed from towns and cities across the UK—and no two participants attended the same school or sixth form college. Thus, the data speaks not only to the lived experiences of fifteen bisexual male youth, but to fifteen school and sixth form cultures, too.

Another limitation to this study is that it only reports on the experiences of openly bisexual youth. It is quite possible that those who remain closeted have more negative experiences—either because they choose to remain closeted because their school

environments are more homophobic or because they lack the social skills, confidence or networks to come out in a successful manner. Even so, that openly bisexual youth are having increasingly positive experiences of school and sixth form is a significant finding in itself.

Accordingly, this article demonstrates the increasingly positive experiences of many openly bisexual youth in the UK. Contrary to earlier research which found near-total negative experiences for sexual minority youth (Rivers, 2001; Warwick, Aggleton and Douglas, 2001), it is possible for bisexual youth to have positive experiences of being out, free from fear and harassment. However, this article also highlights that bisexuals' experiences are not homogenous, and that prejudice continues to contour the lives of some. This article contributes to a growing body of literature that charts improvements in the lives and experiences of LGBT youth in the UK(Anderson, McCormack and Ripley, 2014; Jones and Clarke, 2007).

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Endnote

1. Academics have studied the nature and effects of prejudice and discrimination against sexual minorities for several decades, and have tended to call this homophobia. Despite critiques of the term (Herek, 2004), it continues to have sociological utility (McCormack and Anderson, 2014). Given that research documenting a liberalization of attitdues toward sexual minorities have tended to use the term homophobia (McCormack, 2012; Weeks, 2007), we use 'homophobia' in this article to refer to general forms of sexual minority prejudice, and use the term the bisexual burden (Anderson, McCormack & Ripley, 2014) to refer to prejudice that is unique to bisexuals.

2. Sixth form colleges are post-16 educational institutions in the UK where students gain qualifications needed for university or working life.